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ABSTRACT

Alternative models of rural school improvement consortia were identified through a review of research literature in order to determine what existing models were applicable to rural school consortia in the northwest United States. Organization structure of rural school collaboratives and characteristics associated with successful functioning were delineated. Five organizational models were found: cooperative model with no affiliated intermediary, educational service agency as intermediate unit model, state education agencies model, university model, and professional association model. Each model is discussed and examples of existing consortia given. Common attributes, characteristics, advantages, and benefits of successful rural school collaboratives are listed. These include high levels of dependence on trust, communication, and shared goals, effective planning, group problem solving, comprehensive staff development programs, competent leadership, internal stability, and the instructional and administrative benefits of shared services. The role of field agentry in four of the five collaborative models is examined and characteristics of effective field agents are listed. Two models and three existing rural school improvement centers are recommended for further study. (LFL)

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RURAL COLLABORATIVES:

A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A review of the research literature was conducted to identify alternative models of rural school improvement consortia. This research synthesis was completed as part of NWREL's Rural Networking Project to determine how rural school collaboratives are organized and what characteristics are associated with their successful functioning. The literature on the topic was limited.

Rural school collaborative models generally differed along two lines. The function of the collaborative was the first dimension in which variations were found. Rural schools organize into consortia to share special education and other staff, transportation and food services, instructional media, personnel selection and staff development, among other things. However, since the intent of the NWREL Rural Networking Project is to promote school improvement consortia, arranging rural collaborative models by function is not particularly relevant or useful. Only collaborative models which emphasize the improvement of schooling and instruction are of concern.

The second dimension in which collaboratives differ is organizational structure. Five distinct organizational arrangements were identified as rural school collaborative models. The first model is the school cooperative, a self-help arrangement in which schools join forces to accomplish common goals. The remaining four models use an intermediary affiliate as a field agent. That is, other educational institutions provide leadership and support for a collective of two or more schools. These four intermediary affiliate models are the educational service district/school collaborative; the state education agency/school collaborative; the university/school collaborative; and the professional association/school collaborative. These four models are of particular interest because of their involvement with different school improvement organizations.

Common attributes of successful school collaboratives were also identified in the literature. The success of a collaborative is highly dependent on the level of trust, communication, and shared goals of the participating organizations. Intermediary affiliate models provide the advantage of centralized management, resources and services to maintain the inertia of the collaborative.

Little research information was available regarding the university/school collaborative and the professional association/school collaborative models. The NWREL Rural Networking Project intends to study the features of these two models, as well as to identify strategies for building the capacity of these models.

I. FIVE ALTERNATIVE MODELS

As part of NWREL's ongoing efforts to work with and through established rural school improvement consortia in the Northwest region, an in-depth study of the literature and research findings on rural collaboratives was conducted. The purpose of the study was to determine what models currently exist that have applicability to rural consortia or collaboratives in the Northwest. The study resulted in a number of alternative interorganizational structures for collaborative efforts. Five organizational models were found:

1. Co-op Model With No Affiliated Intermediary
2. Educational Service District (ESD)/Intermediate Unit Model
3. State Education Association (SEA) Model
4. University/Higher Education Model
5. Professional Association Model

The literature did not reveal any examples of the professional/association model. The literature primarily distinguishes the various rural consortia by organizational arrangement and function. As the purpose of the NWREL Rural Networking Project is to identify collaboratives with a school improvement function, the organizational arrangement was used as the basis for differentiating the five models, as outlined below:

I. Self-Help Arrangements

   A. School Cooperatives

II. Field Agent Intermediary Affiliates

   A. ESD/School Collaboratives

   B. SEA/School Collaboratives

   C. University/School Collaboratives

   D. Professional Association/School Collaboratives

Each of these is briefly described in the next section and examples are given. A discussion of characteristics found common to all five models concludes the research summary.

Co-op Model with No Affiliated Intermediary

In the Co-op Model, agreements are made in such collaboratives for two or more districts to share services to a greater or lesser degree or to contract for instruction for an individual student such as the special education cooperatives in Kansas and Arkansas. Some cooperatives have a stable administrative district and some rotate this district on a set or periodic basis (Helge, 1984).

Examples of the Co-op Model include (Schmidt, 1983):

- Minnesota--four small school districts developed nine basic programs, coordinated by a steering committee; agendas are developed with input from four subcommittees (high school programs, general curriculum, general administration, public relations).
- Minnesota--61 Cooperative Vocational Centers are joint efforts of two or more neighboring school districts to provide secondary vocational education and to strengthen, extend, and expand existing vocational education programs.
- Maryland--eight educational institutions serving three Appalachian counties have joined together to plan and develop public education on a regional basis. The four programs are conservation of education resources, community services, staff development, and a public service communications satellite system.
- Massachusetts--school districts are looking at cooperative agreements as politically acceptable alternatives to further reorganization through consolidation.
- New York--a cooperative venture has been formed by ten school districts in West Central New York for students identified as potential dropouts.

- Maine--the Maine Mastery Learning Consortium, composed of 16 school districts, was formed because it was understood that staff development without follow-up cannot result in significant classroom change. The consortium offers content demonstrations, observations, conferences, mini workshops, awareness sessions, and team teaching.

Other examples of successful shared co-op ventures include (Hanuske, 1983):

- South Dakota--traveling vocational education in a van provides 9-week courses to several rural districts.
- Connecticut--seven districts share a superintendent, director of instruction, federal programs, special education directors, and a legal agent.
- Appalachia--eight school districts share health programs.
- California--one small district contracts with a neighboring district for transportation services.
- Alaska--eight districts formed a consortium to apply for funds to develop an Athabascan social studies curriculum.
- Minnesota--two rural districts pair to provide grades K-3 and 7-9 in one district, and grades 4-6 and 10-12 in the other; all activities are paired.

Notice that the cooperative model tends to focus directly on instructional services.

ESD/Intermediate Unit Model

This type of educational collaborative generally includes state-mandated special district systems and educational service agencies, both with service orientations. Examples are the New York BOCES (Board of Cooperative Education Services), intermediate education units (Pennsylvania), or educational service districts (Oregon).

Research has shown that special district service agencies such as the BOCES and other intermediate units have made more significant contributions of programs and services to public school districts than have most regionalized and cooperative state educational networks (Helge, 1984). This is attributed to the fact that most special districts have a more comprehensive, faster-growing staff than do regionalized and cooperative education service agency networks. Other examples of the ESD/Intermediate Unit Model include (Schmidt, 1983):

- Oregon--to comply with PL 94-142, 16 rural school districts covering 5,100 square miles, and 19,000 students, developed support mechanisms for pooling their federal funds under an ESD plan; 10 steps which local districts must follow to comply with federal and state regulations were identified as well as the persons responsible for each step. Thus, this collaborative has a special education service function.

- Texas—20 regional education service centers were established in 1967 to provide for local needs; services to small districts include Migrant Education, Title I Programs, Support Services, and Special Education. Thus, this collaborative provides a special program function.

- Minnesota--school districts in southwest and west central Minnesota have developed educational cooperative service units, an intermediate agency that is an extension of the member schools. Instructional services include a teacher center, curriculum development, career education, nutrition education, and an information network. This is a more diversified function, directed toward staff and curriculum development.

- Texas--Region 20 serves 50 districts in 14 counties and provides evaluation services.

- Alaska--a rural industrial outreach center is being developed which will function on a regional basis and provide service to several school districts in the areas of: needs assessment; identification, purchase, and distribution of instructional materials; design of competency based programs; teacher orientation and in-service training; and evaluation, with a vocational education focus.

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SEA Model

This classification refers to decentralized extensions of state education agencies that do not provide direct services such as the educational collaboratives in Massachusetts (Helge, 1984). Other examples of the SEA Model include (Schmidt, 1983):

- Southern States--many have developed an academic common market--an interstate agreement for sharing programs. Participating states make arrangements for their residents to enroll in specific programs in other states on an in-state tuition basis.

University/Higher Education Model and Professional Association Model

These two models are included in a group of models identified in the research as "other interorganizational arrangements" (Helge, 1984). Only a few examples of the University/Higher Education model were found. These include:

- Iowa: a community college offers 1/2-day instruction in several courses for high school students from a nine-school cooperative.
- Illinois: Waubonsee Community College, through its council for area planning of educational services, is attempting to do more with less by sharing services, facilities, and programs, and avoiding unnecessary duplication. The council includes educational institutions from all levels--K through university as well as public and private, formal and informal.
- Florida: a cooperative venture was formed between the University of West Florida and the Okaloosa County School District to address concerns of two rural communities; a five-year plan was designed to strengthen the educational opportunities available to rural children from low-income homes.

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II. ADVANTAGES, BENEFITS, AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL COLLABORATIVES

The concept of shared services is a central theme in the research literature--pooled resources that are provided without overemphasizing regulatory functions. Shared services are known by a variety of names--cooperatives, leagues, consortia, collaboratives, and pairings. The research indicates that more and more small, rural schools are turning to shared services to: 1) keep community schools open; 2) meet federal mandates; and 3) improve educational opportunities (Hanuske, 1983). A study conducted by NWREL on effective collaborative efforts (Sarason, Pascarelli, and Crohn, 1985) indicates that successful collaboration involves:

- Effective and thorough planning
- Shared decision making; group problem solving
- Equal and voluntary participation
- Common understanding of purpose
- Adequate time to carry out tasks
- Open and continuous communication
- Trust and openness among participating agencies
- Clarity regarding potential barriers to collaboration, such as underestimating the time required, failing to engage in adequate planning, or losing organizational autonomy and program visibility
- Individual benefits as well as whole group benefits
- Commitment of participants with opportunities for follow-through
- Clarity of intent, division of labor and clear rewards
- Highly competent leadership by persons not already overextended

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- Internal stability that encourages participating agencies to take risks
- Development of an action plan
- Energy to sustain progress during setbacks and conflicts

Advantages and Benefits of Rural Collaboratives

The research indicates that a common attribute of successful rural collaboratives is shared services. The advantages of sharing services include (Hanushke, 1983):

- Maintained and expanded programs
- Balanced faculty staff with increased academic expertise and support
- Shared organizational services at the management level to help meet federal mandates more easily
- Improved procedures as a result of sharing policy development
- Decreased expenditures through joint purchases--sharing of texts, supplies, equipment and salaries
- Increased community support with the development of common policies, calendars and schedules, and with a focus on students

Moreover, when participating agencies in a collaborative share services, they reap the following benefits (Helge, 1984):

- Improved cost efficiency ratios
- Sense of local autonomy
- Easier compliance with federal mandates
- Access to program/service specialists
- Better teacher retention
- Increased parent involvement
- Shared information for better planning

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- o Nonthreatening information exchange
- o Benefits of temporary systems
- o Assessment/reallocation of resources
- o Conflict resolution

Characteristics of Rural Collaboratives

The research reveals that rural collaboratives with successful delivery systems have some of the following characteristics in common:

- o Support from legislative/regulatory agency
- o Appropriate geographic scope
- o A structure that facilitates achievement of goals and objectives of the collaborative
- o A structure that allows for divergent goals of each unit in the collaborative
- o Clear procedures for delivering service
- o A service delivery system that is equitable
- o Appropriate lines of staff accountability
- o An effective planning system based on evaluation data
- o An effective communication system
- o Local district responsibility for services
- o Strategies to involve the public in decision making
- o Strategies to obtain local support for change
- o Strategies to collaborate with other external agencies
- o A focus on realistic and effective intra-agency collaboration
- o Strategies to involve parents
- o Strategies to retain qualified personnel
- o Development of comprehensive staff development programs

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Further, successful rural collaboratives have comprehensive staff development programs in common. These core programs include:

- o In-service for all professionals, including both administrators and teachers
- o Trainers who work in building teams with the program coordinator to clarify the mission of outside staff
- o A systematic process for confronting problems
- o A focus on individualized instruction
- o Identification of all research to be used

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III. FIELD AGENTRY IN RURAL COLLABORATIVES

During the 1970s, much emphasis on the national level was placed on the processes of dissemination, linking, and field agentry. Attention was paid to linking processes in response to research findings which indicated that an organization's capacity to change is positively related to both openness to new ideas as well as to exchange opportunities with other organizations. Scholars and educational leaders were interested in ways communication between organizations can facilitate change. The result was a growing body of ideas and findings about the linking process and the role of the individual and the organization in that process. When funding ended in the late 1970s for widespread dissemination efforts, much of the action research on the role of the field agent also ceased. Yet most of what was discovered about effective linking processes during that period has tremendous applicability today, and indeed, most organizations have internalized the research on linking processes and have applied this knowledge to the modern field agent of the 1980s, more often called the consultant, trainer, or technical assistant. Therefore, we feel a revisitation to field agentry research is warranted.

Field agentry is a core component of four of the five collaborative models. It is a function of those collaboratives with a parent (or intermediary affiliate) organization such as ESDs, SEAs, universities and higher education institutions, as well as professional associations. Field agentry is not a component of the co-op model as no parent organization exists in the infrastructure.

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A field agent is a person who works with an organization (but is not a part of that organization) to facilitate change. Field agents are also called advisors, liaisons, site coordinators, etc. Field agents believe that change is accomplished first by individuals, then groups, and finally institutions. Hall (1978) suggests that failure to recognize that fact is a major reason for failure. The more field agents are able to work with clients on a face-to-face basis, the more they are able to build empathy and trust. The roles of field agents in rural collaboratives are multifaceted and different for each situation.

Effective field agents are able to operate in complex environments; they are also able to (Crandall, 1977):

- Conceptualize the basic elements of a problem
- Respond constructively to new information
- Provide original ideas and fresh perspectives
- Bring theory to bear on problems occurring in action settings
- Resist premature closure but proceed toward closure when appropriate

Many field agents do not possess a full repetoire of these skills, making training programs necessary. As such, training programs for field agents will focus on: problem solving skills, communication skills, resource utilization skills, planning skills, process helping skills, implementation skills, content and subject matter knowledge, evaluation and documentation skills, and survival skills.

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IV. APPLICATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

As part of the OERI scope of work, the NWREL Rural Networking Project will work with three existing rural school improvement centers. The three organizations selected are:

1. Idaho State University, Bureau of Educational Research and Services, League of Schools
2. Montana County Superintendents Association Region V Staff Development Consortium in cooperation with Western Montana College
3. Gonzaga University Rural Education Center Consortium

These three organizations were selected from the many collaboratives in the rural Northwest for three reasons. First, they all focus on school improvement through staff development, technical assistance, and curriculum/instruction leadership. Second, NWREL is committed to work with and through school improvement organizations, so that cooperatives were not considered in the final selection of participating consortia. Finally, little research is available on university and professional association collaboratives. Therefore, the NWREL Rural Networking Project intends to both study the features of these two models and apply the research findings from other organizational arrangements to the capacity building of these two structural forms of rural school improvement networks.

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